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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Self-transcendent Media Experiences: Taking Meaningful Media to a Higher Level

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*Interest in the meaningful sides of media entertainment has blossomed over the last decade, with numerous scholars examining how certain media content can enhance social good and well-being. Because social scientific work in this area is relatively new and is rapidly evolving, numerous conceptualizations of meaningful media experiences have been introduced. In this paper we argue for the importance of recognizing a unique form of media experience that causes us to look beyond our own concerns, to recognize moral beauty, and to feel unity with humanity and nature—what we label here as “self-transcendent media experiences.”*

**Keywords:** Mass Communication, Entertainment, Meaningfulness, Self-Transcendence, Eudaimonia.

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Media effects research has tended to focus on the potential harm of exposure to media, especially entertainment, including increased aggression, prejudice, and unhealthy behaviors (Lowery & DeFleur, 1994). Identifying and combating the deleterious effects of media are worthy causes, particularly in today's social and political landscape where media are often used to fragment society and to instigate suspicion, hostility, and hate.

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At such a time, we believe the imperative has never been stronger to study ways that media can support audience members in coping with the frightening uncertainties of human existence, to recognize the moral beauty within themselves and others, and to heighten compassion and connectedness with other humans and the planet as a whole.

Over the last decade, entertainment research has experienced a renaissance (Bryant & Vorderer, 2006). Building upon foundational scholarship that has largely characterized entertainment in hedonic terms (e.g., Zillmann & Bryant, 1994), newer scholarship has turned its attention to how some, perhaps exceptional, media content can provide viewers with meaningful, contemplative, and moving experiences (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Vorderer & Reinecke, 2015; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). As the area has developed, the phrase “meaningful media experiences” has been used by scholars to describe various phenomena. In this paper, we highlight a particular type of meaningful media experience that we argue reflects “self-transcendence”—experiences pertaining to universality and connectedness, moral virtue, and spirituality. In doing so, we hope to advance scholarship in the area by making evident how media may function as not only a means for self-focused well-being, but also as a catalyst for greater appreciation of other-oriented connectedness, virtue, and actions.

At the outset, we must note that a single definition of “meaningful media” cannot be provided without reference to audience reactions. In other words, meaningful media content is not a single “thing” or even a specific genre, but is rather a phrase to refer to content that elicits responses that individuals identify as “meaningful.” Although the phrase “meaningful media” is inherently idiosyncratic (e.g., what is meaningful for one person might not be for another), research reveals common themes in audience-identified meaningful content, including portrayals of moral virtue, the human condition, and purpose in life (as found in films like *Life is Beautiful*, 1997, and *The Pursuit of Happyness*, 2006). Because such themes are fluid and open to interpretation, rather than use the phrase “meaningful media” (which may, for example, imply high- versus low-brow judgments of content), we use the phrase “meaningful media experiences” to emphasize the importance of subjective perceptions and reactions. For example, some viewers may find the movie *The Blind Side* (2009) deeply moving, whereas other people may find it overly sentimental if not offensive. Likewise, some may find entertainment with even deeply troubling themes—consider *Birth of a Nation* (1915) or *Triumph of the Will* (1935)—nevertheless moving and inspiring. With this in mind, we first discuss how current conceptualizations of meaningful media have focused on eudaimonic experiences, and then we explain why distinguishing self-transcendent experiences furthers scholarship in this area by delineating subjective experiences with meaningful content that expand human experience and capacity from ones that do not (or ones which may even have the reverse impact).

### Current conceptualizations of eudaimonic media experiences

In attempting to expand the boundaries of foundational entertainment theories, many media scholars have turned to ancient writings and existing scholarship in other

disciplines that distinguish *hedonic* gratifications or happiness from those associated with flourishing, well-being, or *eudaimonic* happiness (Aristotle, trans. 1931). For example, Waterman's (1993) work makes a distinction between hedonic happiness associated with pleasure, and eudaimonic happiness, which he called "expressiveness." Waterman noted that activities associated with eudaimonic happiness are more strongly associated with feelings of concentration, challenge, and competence, whereas hedonic activities are more strongly associated with feeling happy, content, and relaxed. Likewise, additional scholars (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 2008) have argued that subjective well-being is associated with positive affect, while psychological well-being is associated with self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, autonomy, and self-acceptance (see also self-determination theory, Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using similar reasoning, scholars have identified a few dimensions of meaningful media experiences as foundational to their work: mixed affect, cognitive effort, and fulfillment of intrinsic needs.

First, *affect* is thought to play a crucial role in motivating and describing eudaimonic media responses. Perhaps as a reaction to entertainment scholarship historically focused on hedonic responses, early research on meaningful media frequently focused on negatively valenced reactions such as sadness or grief. More recently, however, scholars are increasingly noting that meaningful media experiences may involve more complex affective responses that are better characterized by words such as *touched*, *moved*, *tender*, or *poignant* (Oliver, 2008), or by the experience of *mixed affect* (Slater, Oliver, & Appel, 2016). For example, when watching a love story or romance (e.g., *Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993), viewers may report feeling "bittersweet" or touched by the love story.

Second, numerous scholars have observed that meaningful media experiences tend to be associated with higher levels of cognitive or effortful processing (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2017; Bartsch & Schneider, 2014), akin to those described in the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), or the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). Unsurprisingly, some scholars have argued that enjoyment and appreciation (or hedonic and eudaimonic media gratifications) fit well into a dual-process model (e.g., Lewis, Tamborini, & Weber, 2014). For example, viewers may report great appreciation of films such as *Memento* (2000) or *The Usual Suspects* (1995) that require viewers to piece together a cognitively complex plot, multiple story lines, or morally ambiguous characters.

Finally, some scholars have conceptualized meaningful media experiences in terms of fulfillment of *intrinsic needs* such as those identified by self-determination theory (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). For example, Vorderer (2011) proposed a two-level model of entertainment motivation in which enjoyment reflects the more simple and mechanical responses of comprehension and pleasure, whereas appreciation reflects the extent to which entertainment can help to fulfill needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness (see also Slater, Johnson, Cohen, Comello, & Ewoldsen, 2014). For example, some viewers may find Horatio Alger stories of persistence (e.g., *Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008) as meaningful, as they may arouse feelings of hope that hard work will ultimately pay off.

To summarize, experiences involving mixed affect, heightened cognitive effort, and fulfillment of intrinsic needs has formed the basis of emerging scholarship on non-hedonic media gratifications. Although we agree that these types of responses may characterize many meaningful experiences, we also note that such responses are primarily inward-driven and inward-oriented experiences and gratifications. Yet, we believe that the identification of a unique type of meaningful media experience is needed to more fully describe responses that are outward-focused, that consider and promote concepts beyond the self, and that entail an appreciation of the interconnectedness between the self, nature, or the universe—an experience that, to our thinking, reflects self-transcendence. We further contend that such a construct may point to subjective experiences of meaningfulness that reflect universality and inspire healing by cultivating desires to overcome intergroup hostility, for example.

### Self-transcendence

In arguing for an additional conceptualization of meaningful media experiences that we refer to as self-transcendent, we first clarify our use of the term. Although “self-transcendence” often connotes religion or spirituality, we use the term more broadly to reflect “(...) something beyond personal benefit, for example, the furtherance of some greater cause, union with a power beyond the self, and/or service to others as an expression of identification beyond the personal ego” (Koltko-Rivera, 2006, p. 305, note 3; see also Haidt, 2003b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Williams & Harvey, 2001). That is, in the sense we intend it, self-transcendence involves a universalist perspective, a recognition of self-in-other and other-in-self. In the language of social identity theory (Tajfel, 2010), these are perspectives in which the in-group expands to incorporate those more typically categorized as “other.”

We believe that our use of the phrase “self-transcendent” is consistent with both foundational and recent scholarship on well-being. For example, Maslow’s (1943) work on the fulfillment of human motivation is frequently known for identifying the highest-order need as self-actualization, much like Waterman’s (1993) notion of self-expressiveness, or Ryff’s (1989) concept of psychological well-being. Yet as Koltko-Rivera (2006) argued convincingly, Maslow’s later works show that he revised this hierarchy to suggest that the highest-order need reflects gratifications beyond the self—*transhumanistic* or *transcendent* values—such as “truth, goodness, beauty, perfection, excellence, simplicity, elegance, and so on” (Maslow, 1969). Similarly, Wong (2011) proposed the term *chairoic happiness* (as differentiated from hedonic and eudaimonic happiness) to refer to feeling blessed and fortunate because of a sense of awe, gratitude, and oneness with nature or a universal power; it is happiness arising from—though not solely bound to—our spiritual nature and is most often unrelated to our own actions or our own virtue (Ryff, 2012).

## Self-transcendent media experiences

In the context of media experiences, self-transcendence arises as viewers, readers, and players recognize in themselves elements of shared humanity (beyond service or sacrifice for a particular cause or community) and the potential for moral beauty, humility, courage, and hope. They provide awareness of and insight into the beauty and tragedy of the human condition; elevate receivers from their mundane concerns; and increase interconnectedness with others, with their surroundings, and with causes beyond themselves. Further, self-transcendent media experiences give rise to an increased appreciation for the potential, values, and needs of others, for the natural world and powers beyond ourselves, and for moral virtue. For example, watching *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) or *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) may allow viewers to experience the larger lesson of the importance of courage and justice to a compassionate humanity, reading Thoreau's *Walden* may speak to our oneness with nature, and something as seemingly banal as a touching YouTube video may elicit a self-transcendent experience insofar as it makes salient the beauty of the human spirit and our interconnectedness. With this in mind, we suggest that within the broad umbrella of "meaningful media experiences" there exists a continuum, with self-related, egoic gratifications on one end, and self-transcendent experiences on the other. Differentiating these types of experiences provides valuable insight for understanding the range of experiences with meaningful media and the various outcomes that such experiences may have on individuals.

Previously we described the characteristics of eudaimonic media experiences that have formed the basis of emerging scholarship into non-hedonic media: mixed affect, higher levels of cognitive effort, and fulfillment of intrinsic needs. We agree that these media responses are consequential. However, we contend that the experience of one (or all) of these dimensions is insufficient for signifying a self-transcendent experience (as we conceptualize it) if it is self- rather than other-focused. For example, the portrayal of a character overcoming adversity (e.g., *Rocky*, 1976) may result in meaningful feelings of appreciation for the character's determination, promoting a renewed sense of self-confidence in the viewer. However, we are hesitant to say that such a response involves self-transcendence unless it also reflects a heightened awareness of the universality of life's challenges and a respect for human capability that does more than enhance the egoistic self. What additional elements, then, characterize self-transcendent media experiences? We believe that in addition to the characteristics previously discussed, self-transcendent media experiences frequently involve one or more of the following elements: *interconnectedness*, *human virtue and altruistic motivations*, and *spirituality*.

Self-transcendent media experiences involve a heightened awareness and appreciation of the *interconnectedness* among humans, nature, and the universe. In referring to interconnectedness, we intend to connote a meaning larger than liking, affection, or similar self-interested concerns regarding relationships with others. Rather, our use of this term is in keeping with Haidt's (2003a) notion of the dimension of social space



related to divinity—akin to Aristotelian *scala naturae*, which describes a “chain of beings” from the gods to humanity to brutes. We feel elevated when seeing others move closer to the divine (for example, through particular acts of kindness or sacrifice) and disgusted when others act more like animals. Although research shows that the experience of positive emotions in general can improve relationships (Fredrickson, 1998), the moral emotions associated with the divinity dimension (e.g., elevation, gratitude, admiration, which some refer to as self-transcendent emotions) can uniquely inspire people to want to form deeper relationships with others, to emulate the excellence seen in others, and to recognize human goodness and shared experience (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Some, but not all, meaningful media experiences elicit these emotions; only those that lead us beyond self-focused concerns reflect our notion of self-transcendence. Emerging scholarship provides initial support for the idea that self-transcendent media experiences heighten our feelings of connectedness with others, make us aware of the beauty of the human spirit, and heighten our feelings of compassionate love for humanity and for nature in general (e.g., Janicke & Oliver, 2017).

Relatedly, our conceptualization acknowledges that the depiction of moral concerns can evoke meaningful experiences insofar as they require deliberation or introspection (e.g., Lewis et al., 2014), yet the dimension of self-transcendence that we present herein suggests that the depiction of *moral beauty or virtue* is unique in its other-centered focus. The witnessing of exceptional acts of moral beauty such as kindness, compassion, and love, helps viewers to see their higher nature and elevates them to understand a good that is larger and more enduring than the self (Haidt, 2003a, 2003b). Likewise, we believe that self-transcendent media experiences frequently result in heightened motivations for *altruism* and for striving to be a better and more authentically good person (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). These motivations have been documented in a variety of ways, including increases in charitable giving, volunteering, and helping behaviors (for a review, see Pohling & Diessner, 2016).

Self-transcendent media experiences also involve emotions, thoughts, and motivations associated with *spirituality*, a multidimensional construct involving the striving for and experience of unity with oneself, others, nature, and the transcendent (Meezenbroek et al., 2012). Three broad domains have emerged in the scientific study of spirituality, all of which have relevance to media scholars: spirituality as trait, spirituality as personal goal and intention, and spirituality as reflected in specific emotional processes, such as gratitude, reverence, and forgiveness (Emmons, 2006). We argue that the importance of spirituality in self-transcendent media experiences can be seen in the use of media to understand issues such as our own mortality (Klimmt, 2011; Rieger et al., 2015), to contemplate long-lasting and meaningful (and presumably spiritual) values, and to experience profound emotions such as awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

Ultimately, our conceptualization of self-transcendent media experiences fits well with Rosa's (2016) notion of “resonance,” or the sense of connectedness that one can experience with the world (cf., Vorderer, 2017). Resonance can be experienced when we are in nature, but also through music, art, religion, and—most germane to the current discussion—narratives. In moments of resonance, Rosa

contends that the world speaks to us; it is not mute. Thus, resonance is the antithesis of alienation, a state in which the world remains strange, silent, and disconnected. It cannot be initiated or contrived through intention and careful planning. In fact, the more we seek resonance, the more we fail to find it, as doing so is self-focused and instrumental. For us, self-transcendent media experiences are those in which content helps viewers, readers, and players resonate with the world in a universal sense, stimulating renewed (or new) feelings of, appreciation for, and motivation to cultivate interconnectedness, human virtue, altruism, and spirituality.

## Summary and remaining questions

In writing this paper, we argue for the importance of identifying self-transcendent media experiences as a unique and important type of response to meaningful media. In so doing, we conceptualize self-transcendent experiences as characterized by feelings of universalism and connectedness, moral virtue and altruism, and spirituality. We believe that this powerful audience response is relevant for those studying health communication, environmental communication, journalism (especially positive journalism), and media psychology (among others). Still, numerous questions remain unexamined. For example, if self-transcendent media experiences are powerful, transforming, and deeply appreciated, why are our media diets filled with content that is often hostile or banal? Likewise, is there a limit to how much “meaningful” media a person can consume before becoming emotionally fatigued or even cynical? Finally, and importantly, is it possible to identify the specific types of content and the experiences of self-transcendence in ways that are unambiguously and concretely measurable?

We realize that it may seem odd for a group of social scientists to argue for the importance of such an ephemeral concept. However, we are moved to take up the challenge of identifying the concept in this paper, and further describing, explaining, and measuring the phenomenon in our future research, as we believe that all self-transcendent experiences—including ones with media—are likely some of the most profound, timeless, and unifying responses that humans experience. At a time when so much mediated social and political discourse seems bent on dividing, demeaning, and demoralizing individuals, communities, and nations, we come together as a collective of collaborators and colleagues in calling for a closer study of how media can serve to inspire recognition of, respect for, and service to our common humanity.

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